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Mideast States Urged to Use An Arms Pact To Build Trust

By Judith Miller
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The director of the international organization charged with ridding the world of chemical weapons made a plea yesterday to Israelis, Egyptians, Palestinians and others in the Middle East to adhere to the treaty banning such weapons as a way to reduce tensions in the region.

''What is wrong with taking a series of steps which would help to generate a climate of confidence amongst the key players in the region?'' Jose M. Bustani, director general of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, said yesterday in a speech to the United Nations General Assembly.

Signing and ratifying the treaty, he added, ''would demonstrate the genuine willingness of all parties to seek such a comprehensive settlement in parallel with peace negotiations.''

Yemen, Jordan and Sudan have subscribed to the 1997 Chemical Weapons Convention banning such weapons, but Iraq, Egypt, Syria, Libya, Lebanon and the United Arab Emirates have not signed the treaty. Israel signed it in 1993 but has not ratified it, and it has no intention of doing so until its Arab neighbors sign.

''We've made a positive step on this by signing; we're part of the process,'' said Mark Regev, the spokesman for the Israeli Embassy in Washington. ''But we want a regional agreement. Others haven't even signed the convention.''

In the three and a half years since the chemical weapons convention entered into force, the number of nations signing it has grown from 87 to 139. On Nov. 1, Yemen is to become the 140th state to ratify the treaty, under which countries pledge not to ''develop, produce, or stockpile'' chemical weapons.

In an interview, Mr. Bustani described the jump in membership as ''without precedent in the history of verifiable disarmament.'' But the Middle East's resistance to banning chemical weapons is particularly worrisome, he said, since such weapons have recently been used against both combatants and civilians -- by Iraq, for one, though he did not identify it.

The Egyptian Embassy did not return calls for comment. But Egyptian officials have said they would not adhere to treaties banning unconventional weapons like chemical, biological and nuclear weapons until Israel gives up its nuclear arms. Israel is believed to be the only Middle Eastern nation to have developed a nuclear arsenal.

Mr. Bustani called upon leaders of the ''future Palestinian state'' to ''set the record straight from the outset'' by announcing its intention to adhere bans on chemical weapons and nuclear and biological arms. Such a declaration, he said, would contribute significantly to a reduction of tension in the region.

In a reflection of the cycle of the recent violence that has left the peace effort in tatters, however, Nadya Rashid, a spokeswoman for the Palestine observer mission at the United Nations, said she was ''too engrossed'' responding to the current troubles between the Palestine Authority and Israel to determine whether Yasir Arafat or other senior Palestinian leaders would favor making such arms control pledges.

Despite his concern about the Middle East, Mr. Bustani said Russia's delay in destroying the world's largest chemical weapons arsenal was the convention's ''greatest challenge.''

Though Russia had pledged to destroy 1 percent of its arsenal by last April, its first and only full-scale plant for destroying chemical weapons will not even be commissioned until the end of next year. Mr. Bustani blamed a lack of funds and a lack of internal coordination for the setbacks.

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